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Assaulting Mt. Helicon: Writing and Current Affairs.

Monthly Archives: August 2013

ABADDON



Where will the fires start next?

I’ve wanted look at the character of Margarita from *Master and Margarita* for some time, but I’ve been reluctant to do that until I get a copy of *My Life with Mikhail Bulgakov*, written by his second wife, Lyubov Belozerskaya-Bulgakova.

I still don’t have my copy. However, it seems a propitious time to talk about Abaddon, the demon of destruction, because he enters *Master and Margarita* on the night of the [Spring Ball of the Full Moon](#), when Margarita first meets Woland (Satan) and makes her deal with him.

Abaddon enters the story on the meeting of Satan and Margarita. Actually, many Abaddons enter the story then, because we’re told that the rank and file of Satan’s helpers all remind Margarita of Abaddon. They are like ghosts at the ball, a constant, brooding presence behind the revelry.

I think that Bulgakov explains Abaddon best, so an excerpt from *M&M* is provided below. Margarita has just been introduced to Woland, and she is applying a salve to his diseased knee.

‘My attendants insist it’s rheumatism,’ Woland was saying, not taking his eyes off Margarita,’but I strongly suspect that this pain in my knee was left me as a souvenir by a charming witch with whom I was closely acquainted in the year 1571, on Mount Brocken, on the Devil’s Podium.’

‘Ah, can that be so!’ said Margarita.

‘Nonsense! In another three hundred years it will all go away! I’ve been recommended a host of medications, but I keep to my granny’s old ways. Amazing herbs she left me, my grandma, that vile old thing! Incidentally, tell me, are you suffering from anything? Perhaps you have some sort of sorrow or soul-poisoning anguish?’

‘No, Messire, none of that,’ replied the clever Margarita, ‘and now that I’m here with you, I feel myself quite well.’

‘Blood is a great thing ...’ Woland said gaily, with no obvious point, and added: ‘I see you’re interested in my globe.’

‘Oh, yes, I’ve never seen anything like it.’

‘It’s a nice little object. Frankly speaking, I don’t enjoy listening to the news on the radio. It’s always reported by some girls who pronounce the names of places inarticulately. Besides, every third one has some slight speech defect, as if they’re chosen on purpose. My globe is much more convenient, especially since I need a precise knowledge of events. For instance, do you see this chunk of land, washed on one side by the ocean? Look, it’s filling with fire. A war has started there. If you look closer, you’ll see the details.’

Margarita leaned towards the globe and saw the little square of land spread out, get painted in many colours, and turn as it were into a relief map. And then she saw the little ribbon of a river, and some village near it. A little house the size of a pea grew and became the size of a matchbox. Suddenly and noiselessly the roof of this house flew up along with a cloud of black smoke, and the walls collapsed, so that nothing was left of the little two-storey box except a small heap with black smoke pouring from it. Bringing her eye still closer, Margarita made out a small female figure lying on the ground, and next to her, in a pool of blood, a little child with outstretched arms.

‘That’s it,’ Woland said, smiling, ‘he had no time to sin. Abaddon’s work is impeccable.’

‘I wouldn’t want to be on the side that this Abaddon is against,’ said Margarita. ‘Whose side is he on?’

‘The longer I talk with you,’ Woland responded amiably, ‘the more I’m convinced that you are very intelligent. I’ll set you at ease. He is of a rare impartiality and sympathizes equally with both sides of the fight. Owing to that, the results are always the same for both sides. Abaddon!’

Woland called in a low voice, and here there emerged from the wall the figure of some gaunt man in dark glasses. These glasses produced such a strong impression on Margarita that she cried out softly and hid her face in Woland’s leg. ‘Ah, stop it!’ cried Woland. ‘Modern people are so nervous!’

He swung and slapped Margarita on the back so that a ringing went through her whole body. ‘Don’t you see he’s got his glasses on? Besides, there has never yet been, and never will be, an occasion when Abaddon appears before someone prematurely. And, finally, I’m here. You are my guest! I simply wanted to show him to you.’

Abaddon stood motionless.

‘And is it possible for him to take off his glasses for a second?’ Margarita asked, pressing herself to Woland and shuddering, but now from curiosity.

‘Ah, no, that’s impossible,’ Woland replied seriously and waved his hand at Abaddon, and he was no more.

Abaddon fades into the woodwork again, hiding behind his dark glasses. Bulgakov’s purpose for the demon is to ‘approve’ the destruction Baron Meigel, a gate-crasher who has come to the Devil’s party to spy. Azazello, the fanged henchman, actually shoots the baron, but the assassination can’t be completed without Abaddon looking on.

Meigel’s death isn’t just revenge for the baron’s intrusion: drinking the baron’s blood pulls Margarita out of the demonic party and back to contemporary Moscow. (See the excerpt below.)

What is a baron with a German name doing working for the Soviet Spectacles Commission? (What *is* the Spectacles Commission?) Why is Meigel courting the devil on his trip to Moscow? Why was Meigel’s death so long before the party? Does he even realize that he’s dead? How do Soviet spies know to watch the apartment in which a supernatural party is taking place and Meigel is being murdered (again)?

Perhaps the answers to these questions have something to do with the issues addressed in my post, [Is the Devil a German?](#)

And then again, maybe Woland’s original description of his protégé provides a more fundamental answer to these questions. Abaddon has a perfect understanding and sympathy for Meigel; as he does for his patron Woland. Despite his god-like understanding of the world around him, the demon claims no responsibility for his actions. He just follows Woland’s commands. The result is the same for everyone.

Abaddon, with his war and intrigue, is spawned from the union between a selfish woman who will do anything to get her lover back and a being who eternally wills evil but only succeeds in frustrating himself. Only people like these two would ‘wield’ someone like Abaddon, who is a perfect slave for the blind, self-obsessed and irresponsible.

Ah, my dearest Baron Meigel,’ Woland, smiling affably, addressed the guest, whose eyes were popping out of his head. ‘I’m happy to commend to you,’ Woland turned to the other guests, ‘the most esteemed Baron Meigel, an employee of the Spectacles Commission, in charge of acquainting foreigners with places of interest in the capital.’

Here Margarita froze, because she recognized this Meigel. She had come across him several times in Moscow theatres and restaurants. ‘Excuse me …’ thought Margarita, ‘but that means -what – that he’s also dead? …’ But the matter straight away clarified itself.

‘The dear baron,’ Woland went on, smiling joyfully, ‘was so charming that, having learned of my arrival in Moscow, he rang me up at once, offering his services along the line of his expertise, that is, acquainting people with places of interest. It goes without saying that I was happy to invite him here.’

Just then Margarita saw Azazello hand the platter with the skull to Koroviev.

‘Ah, yes, incidentally, Baron,’ Woland said, suddenly lowering his voice intimately, ‘rumours have spread about your extreme curiosity. They say that, combined with your no less developed talkativeness, it was beginning to attract general attention. What’s more, wicked tongues have already dropped the word – a stool-pigeon and a spy. And, what’s still more, it is hinted that this will bring you to a sorry end in no more than a month. And so, in order to deliver you from this painful anticipation, we have decided to come to your aid, taking advantage of the fact that you invited yourself here precisely with the purpose of eavesdropping and spying out whatever you can.’

The baron turned paler than Abaddon, who was exceptionally pale by nature, and then something strange took place. Abaddon stood in front of the baron and took off his glasses for a second. At the same moment something flashed fire in Azazello’s hand, something clapped softly, the baron began to fall backwards, crimson blood spurted from his chest and poured down his starched shirt and waistcoat. Koroviev put the cup to the spurt and handed the full cup to Woland. The baron’s lifeless body was by that time already on the floor.

‘I drink your health, ladies and gentlemen,’ Woland said quietly and, raising the cup, touched it to his lips.

Then a metamorphosis occurred. The patched shirt and worn slippers disappeared. Woland was in some sort of black chlamys with a steel sword on

his hip. He quickly approached Margarita, offered her the cup, and said imperiously: ‘Drink!’

Margarita became dizzy, she swayed, but the cup was already at her lips, and voices, she could not make out whose, whispered in both her ears: ‘Don’t be afraid, Queen … don’t be afraid, Queen, the blood has long since gone into the earth. And where it was spilled, grapevines are already growing.’

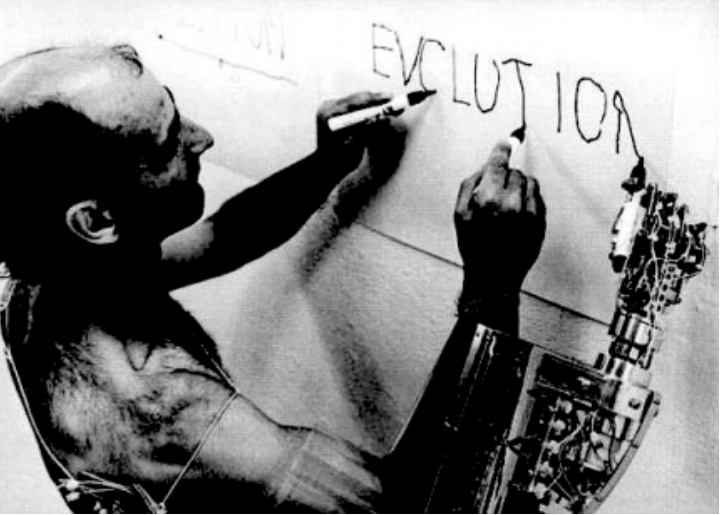
Margarita, without opening her eyes, took a gulp, and a sweet current ran through her veins, a ringing began in her ears. It seemed to her that cocks were crowing deafeningly, that somewhere a march was being played. The crowds of guests began to lose their shape: tailcoaters and women fell to dust. Decay enveloped the room before Margarita’s eyes, a sepulchral smell flowed over it. The columns fell apart, the fires went out, everything shrank, there were no more fountains, no camellias, no tulips. And there was simply this: the modest living room of the jeweller’s widow, and a strip of light falling from a slightly opened door. And Margarita went through this slightly opened door.

LEAVE A COMMENT

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COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS



I’ve read widely the past year or so, looking for out-of-the-way lit journals and writers who are good, yet don’t get the exposure they deserve from the publishing establishment. (Or, haven’t got that exposure yet.) These writers are out there and it’s a joy to me whenever I find them. I pray that they stay good.

However, finding these writers is hard work and precious few lit mags have consistent quality. There are many journals, online magazines, etc. which publish mediocre material that feels very similar to me. There are legions of writers creating this material. Sometimes these writers get published, sometimes they don’t. I haven’t hit on a universal characteristic that separates published mediocre work from not-published mediocre work. I have noticed that the preponderance of mediocre writing follows these trends: it’s naval-gazing and obsessed with personal inadequacy, usually relating to sex. It’s invariably politically-correct. It feels as though the writer has grown very little since junior high, though the delivery can be more polished than what you’d expect from a teenager.

My guess is that there are a lot of bright writers who figured out what’s kosher in their mid-teens, then just stayed there.

Harsh judgement, I know. And of course, it’s only my opinion. I could hide behind market forces now and ask: “How many people actually read these journals?” But that feels like a cop-out, because even if literary fiction is a small phenomenon, there’s still SOMETHING that’s sustaining it. The only thing I can be sure of is I’m not part of the collective consciousness that finds literary fiction’s current incarnation interesting on the whole.

But my situation does pose a challenge to me, because if there’s no ‘Paris’, how do you know what to aim for? It’s not the first time in my life I’ve bumped up against this conundrum, actually.

I think that the answer lies in building a new ‘Paris’ using what you can find, when you can find it. What Stephen King says about the submissions process, the part where you first just get rejected, then get rejected with useful comments from the editor, then finally get some acceptances, is largely true, though you’ll often find yourself bumped back a stage or two. But none the less, at least you’ll get some useful comments.

Many good writers in the past felt a paucity of publication outlets, so they started their own journals. Quality was important to them, so they pulled from a network of writers whose work they respected, which is why I feel it’s worth reading all those lit mags for that precious

one percent. (For the network-strategy to work the editor needs to be respected in return and give up a little control about what gets published. He has to love the literary milieu around him more than he loves what his journal can do for him. Great fun for the reader, though: I’d always rather read what somebody wants to write, instead of what they think’ll get published.)

The long and short is, when one door closes another opens. In my ‘Paris’, writers are storytellers who call it as they see it. You know, what Hemingway is supposed to be.

Building something new is work. It doesn’t pay, in a monetary sense at least. (Very few great writers lived solely off their writing, so I see no reason why I should expect to.) If I’m lucky and that ‘something new’ finds a fan-base, I probably won’t see any writing in book form till I’m well into middle age. But the upside is tremendous: *the chance* of making an honest, unique contribution to the thought of the age. I can’t put a price on that.

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POISONING THE PEN



This post is a review of the short story that ended Mikhail Bulgakov’s career: *No. 13 The Elpit Workers’ Commune*. Why did this story end Bulgakov’s career? In answer to that, here’s a quote from *The Master and Margarita*, where the Master learns through literary op-eds that his writing has been black-listed:

The articles, please note, did not cease. I laughed at the first of them. But the more of them that appeared, the more my attitude towards them changed. The second stage was one of astonishment. Some rare falsity and insecurity could be sensed literally in every line of these articles, despite their threatening and confident tone. I had the feeling, and I couldn’t get rid of it, that the authors of these articles were not saying what they wanted to say, and that their rage sprang precisely from that.

I know a few writers and the vast majority censor themselves to some degree. They do this to keep the book deals coming, or to protect themselves professionally. One thing I’ve noticed though, is that the more they “censor themselves”— which in the USA is really just a euphemism for pervasive State censorship— the more bitter and angry they are. They can’t express themselves honestly. They’re like stunted, twisted trees. And when it comes to ‘choose sides’ in any debate, these stunted authors side with whomever they view as most powerful, spewing their frustration through personal attacks onto people from the opposing side.

This behavior is ugly and ignoble. It’s unmanly. However, such attacks serve two purposes. They distract the weak-minded from what’s really important about the issue at hand. It’s not just establishment-beholden writers who behave this way. Take, for instance, Hayden’s attack on “hackers” in the wake of Ed Snowden: “[twentysomethings who haven’t talked to the opposite sex in five or six years](#)”.

Secondly, these attacks are an emotional release for people frustrated at their own impotence. I view [establishment writers](#), [journalists](#) or any other flavored [shill](#) on the same level as vandals, animal abusers and parking-lot brawlers. They’re immature people who haven’t yet decided to take responsibility for their own emotional health, and ultimately, for their own happiness. They vent their frustration onto “safe” and inappropriate targets. If you choose slavery, whose fault is it that you’re a slave?

In *No. 13 The Elpit Workers’ Commune* Bulgakov made it clear that he wasn’t going to be a slave. In consequence, it was clear to the literary establishment that Bulgakov had to be contained. Here’s a quote from contemporary critic and head of the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, Leopold Averbakh, on *No. 13* and the other stories in Bulgakov’s collection *Diaboliad*:

We need satire, but this satire must be filled with the pathos of our cause, and it is only from the pen of a satirist who lives and breaths our fight, who understands it, that Soviet satire can be born!

Bulgakov’s stories must make us leap anxiously to the alert. A writers is emerging who does not even dress himself in fellow-traveler’s colours. Not only our critics and bibliographers but also our publishers must be on their guard, and Glavlit– even more so.

Averbakh, like so many early Bolshevik attack-dogs, was eventually disgraced and eaten by his own revolution. Bulgakov: *I toadaso*.

What’s *No. 13* about? Keeping the heating on. “No. 13 The Elpit”, a luxuriant, pre-revolution apartment building, has been commandeered as a worker’s hostel. The apartments, where banksters, playboys and generals once caroused with their mistresses, spies and abortion doctors, have now become home to hundreds of the dispossessed and uneducated. The only thing that remains the same is Elpit’s maintenance staff.

It takes all the cunning and corruption of the imperial-era manager to get a steady supply of heating oil in order to prevent Elpit’s pipes from bursting. It takes all of his draconian bullying– bullying that would make the Okhrana blush– to keep the workers from lighting fires on the parquet and burning each other alive.

But even the corruption of Elpit’s imperial-era manager is not enough to keep a roof over everyone’s head in Soviet times. Eventually, a foolish peasant woman breaks the rules, lights a fire, and sends scores of people to a violent, fiery death.

And that’s what got under Averbakh’s skin. The story of Elpit is totally believable. Even die-hard revolutionaries couldn’t disagree with Bulgakov’s assessment of Soviet society: corruption was worse than before and the people being ‘helped’ couldn’t help themselves. The problem with Bulgakov is that instead of throwing up his hands and saying “God’s Will”; his criticism snaps back on Averbakh’s patrons. Unforgivable sin.

Out of all the stories in *Diaboliad*, *No. 13 The Elpit* is the most effective because it’s so grounded in reality that there’s nowhere left for government apologists to hide. Bulgakov has disarmed them through truth and black comedy. No apologist can win against an argument that sexy. Of course, *Diaboliad* was Bulgakov’s first and last real book published in the Soviet Union during his lifetime. *During his lifetime*.

Postponed publication was a sacrifice Bulgakov was willing to make because truth-in-writing was more important to him than flattery. Truth-in-writing was so important that Bulgakov made the redemption of Bezdomnie, an establishment poet who casts off slavery, the primary thread of *Master and Margarita*.

The good news is that there’s hope for writers who’ve poisoned their own pen through self-censorship. They can choose to stop. They can take up the responsibility of free men everywhere and speak their minds. They can, like Bezdomnie, stop writing bad poetry.

1 COMMENT

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SILENCE AROUND MR. APPELBAUM UPDATE



At least he has a sense of humor.

Everyone concerned with the PRISM revelations should now be contacting their representatives and encouraging their friends to do the same. That’s what should be happening, and it seems to be happening *en masse*– in Germany and the US at least.

Supporters of the NSA’s abusive programs are trying to distract from Snowden’s important revelations by drawing attention to Wikileaks, which is an organization that is difficult to understand. I think that [Lonnie Snowden](#) said it best:

“I don’t want to put him [Edward] in peril, but I am concerned about those who surround him,” he says. “I think WikiLeaks, if you’ve looked at past history, you know, their focus isn’t necessarily the Constitution of the United States. It’s simply to release as much information as possible.”

Julian Assange is the weakest link for anybody defending Snowden’s actions from NSA shills.

I should say, Assange is the weakest link that American talking heads are willing to spout about. There’s one more. His name is Jacob Appelbaum and you probably know him from his promotion of the [Tor](#) network.

What is Tor? From their website:

Tor was originally designed, implemented, and deployed as a third-generation [onion routing project of the Naval Research Laboratory](#). It was originally developed with the U.S. Navy in mind, for the primary purpose of protecting government communications. Today, it is used every day for a wide variety of purposes by the military, journalists, law enforcement officers, activists, and many others.

Jacob Appelbaum released an interview with Snowden to *Der Spiegel* about Tempora and German intelligence cooperation with the NSA’s abusive programs. Read an English version [here](#).

Appelbaum explains how he was granted such an interview:

“In mid-May, documentary filmmaker Laura Poitras contacted me,” Appelbaum said. “She told me she was in contact with a possible anonymous National Security Agency (NSA) source who had agreed to be interviewed by her.”

“She was in the process of putting questions together and thought that asking some specific technical questions was an important part of the source verification process. One of the goals was to determine whether we were really dealing with an NSA whistleblower. I had deep concerns of COINTELPRO-style entrapment. We sent our securely encrypted questions to our source. I had no knowledge of Edward Snowden’s identity before he was revealed to the world in Hong Kong. He also didn’t know who I was. I expected that when the anonymity was removed, we would find a man in his sixties.”

There are a few things different between Appelbaum’s interview and the interviews that Greenwald and Poitras published. First, you’ll notice Snowden’s language is more crass. Second, there was no release of documents involved with Appelbaum. Appelbaum claims that Snowden was willing to have Appelbaum publish their conversation at Appelbaum’s convenience.

Now, at face value, Appelbaum’s interest in Edward is very understandable. Appelbaum is famous for supporting internet freedom. Things get less comfortable when you dig deeper though: Appelbaum’s Tor project is part of the US Naval Research Laboratory and is funded by outfits like the NRL, **Google**, the [Broadcasting Board of Governors](#) (that’s a .gov link!), the (US) National Science Foundation, Human Rights Watch, [Shinjiru International](#) (Microsoft endorsed), [The Knight Foundation](#), [Radio Free Asia](#) and the [National Christian Foundation](#) (!?). Read the full list of sponsors [here](#).

Appelbaum spends his time educating US law enforcement (like the FBI– *team sport!*) on how to monitor websites without revealing that the government is watching, as well as helping dissidents– particularly dissidents in countries hostile to the US– send information securely.

Why would Poitras go to a guy who is funded by the US military, the abuse-complicit company Google, US propaganda outfits, and a faith-based tax avoidance operation to vet Snowden? Oh yeah, *and* Appelbaum’s famous for educating the FBI– that organization from the Verizon tap order.

Appelbaum stood in for Assange once when the Wikileaks head couldn’t make it to a speech– read *Rolling Stone*’s saccharine piece on Appelbaum [here](#). Yet, despite all the weirdness around Appelbaum, Beltliners keep pounding the Assange drum.

Washington: Why not sling mud at Appelbaum? Or is he a little too close to home? Oh yeah, and now Human Rights Watch is ‘handling’ Snowden’s case from the US of A– sort of like how the FSB is ‘handling’ his case from Russia.

Sadly, Edward Snowden has a lot of dangerous people around him. Some are playing damage control, others are trying to make hay. These games are impossible for Snowden to avoid, because what he did is so important.

Eyes on the prize everyone: Snowden’s revelations are about constitutional rights and reining in civil servants who have lost touch with reality. Call your senators, congressmen and push for the deepest intelligence funding cuts you can. Lobby like your life depends on it.

— — — — —

I forgot to add that Poitras contacted Appelbaum in order to vet Snowden on the technical details of the whistleblower’s NSA experience. Here’s how Appelbaum describes it:

“She [Poitras] was in the process of putting questions together and thought that asking some specific technical questions was an important part of the source verification process. One of the goals was to determine whether we were really dealing with an NSA whistleblower. I had deep concerns of COINTELPRO-style entrapment. We sent our securely encrypted questions to our source.”

And...

“The following questions are excerpted from a larger interview that covered numerous topics, many of which are highly technical in nature. Some of the questions have been reordered to provide the required context. The questions focus almost entirely on the NSA’s capabilities and activities. It is critical to understand that these questions were not asked in a context that is reactive to this week’s or even this month’s events. They were asked in a relatively quiet period, when Snowden was likely enjoying his last moments in a Hawaiian paradise — a paradise he abandoned so that every person on the planet might come to understand the current situation as he does.”

So presumably, Poitras thought that Applebaum would know the ‘right answer’ to the technical questions he asked Snowden. (Or at least she believed that Appelbaum would know if an answer was within the NSA’s technical capabilities.) We’re only given some of the questions and answers. So which of these technical questions might Appelbaum know the ‘right answer’ to?

1. Are German authorities or German politicians involved in the NSA surveillance system?
2. But if details about this system are now exposed, who will be charged?

3. Did the NSA help to create Stuxnet? (*Stuxnet is the computer worm that was deployed against the Iranian nuclear program.*)
4. What are some of the big surveillance programs that are active today and how do international partners aid the NSA? Follow up: Is there a way of circumventing that? [*'Cause we all know Tor is weak!*- a.nolen]
5. Do the NSA and its partners across the globe do full dragnet data collection for telephone calls, text and data?
6. The NSA is building a massive new data center in Utah. What is its purpose?
7. Do private companies help the NSA?
8. Are there companies that refuse to cooperate with the NSA?
9. What websites should a person avoid if they don't want to get targeted by the NSA?
10. What happens after the NSA targets a user?

If I was in in Appelbaum's position, I wouldn't want to admit knowing the right answer to ANY of these questions.

Appelbaum doesn't differentiate between 1) questions that he used to decide if Snowden was a legit NSA employee (i.e. if Snowden could possibly know what he is talking about) and 2) questions that Appelbaum just wanted to get on record. (For his own sake or Snowden's, I wonder.) Appelbaum does admit to presenting the questions in *Der Spiegel* in a different order than which he asked them, though again, we're not told how the order was changed.

Why not tell us which questions convinced you of Snowden's authenticity, Jacob? Are the rest of us just too stupid to understand the "highly technical" parts? When were you sure that Snowden wasn't a "COINTELPRO-style" trap? The public would love to know.

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